DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 694 JC 800 383

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TITLE Institutional Mission in an Era of Retrenchment.
PUB DATE 10 Jan 80
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges (Phoenix, AZ, January 10-12, 1980)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Role; *Community Colleges; Declining Enrollment; Educational Finance; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Planning; Financial Problems; Institutional Cooperation; *Organizational Objectives; *Retrenchment; School Holding Power; Student Recruitment; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS City University of New York

ABSTRACT

If colleges are to avoid becoming mere self-perpetuating bureaucracies, administrators should dispel the notion that retrenchment in times of fiscal constraint must necessarily compromise institutional mission. Indeed, institutional mission is anchored in the rationale for a college's existence in the first place. Mission statements articulate educational goals which transcend, to a great extent, economic and demographic changes; as such, these statements should never be formulated as transient policies to be refocused in times of serious external pressures. As diminishing student enrollments and declining financial resources necessitate retrenchment policies, colleges should keep in mind that attempts at institutional survival and job-preservation tactics, such as cutbacks in high-cost programs and recruitment campaigns which promise education without study, can only diminish the ability of the college to fulfill its mission. Institutional integrity can be protected by concentrating efforts on retention, as well as recruitment, and by participating in regional educational planning to assure that necessary cutbacks do not inhibit the fulfillment of area educational needs. Such actions, while requiring different approaches to a college's mission, do not change that mission itself. (JP)

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ED188694

Institutional Mission In An Era Of Retrenchment

by

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Prepared for:

Annual Meeting
American Association of Colleges
Phoenix, Arizona
January 10-12, 1980

JC 800 383

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Abstract

During a time of financial crisis when the intact delivery of higher education services is seriously threatened by the spectre of retrenchment, the question arises whether changes in institutional mission can effectively address the problems confronting the higher education community. This paper explores whether the concepts of "mission" and "retrenchment" exist in a cause and effect relationship and, if not, what form of interaction between the two does prevail. It addresses the notion of "mission" as central to the perpetuity of any institution and poses questions relating to its nature, formulation, evaluation and reformulation over a period of time. Retrenchment is seen as a drastic response to declining student numbers and dwindling financial resources which, if at all avoidable, must not be allowed to destroy an institutional mission. The interaction of mission and retrenchment is not seen as a cause and effect relationship. Instead, both concepts exist as "effects" of a variety of circumstances, both intra and extra institutional. A juxtaposition of survival of the mission and survival of the institution is employed in order to demonstrate how easily an initially service-oriented college can be perverted to become a self-perpetuating bureaucracy.

Introduction

I accepted the invitation to make a presentation to you today because I can never resist a challenge. The topic before us - Institutional Mission in an Era of Retrenchment - is certainly that. I was particularly intrigued by the program description which states that this session will focus on the problems and challenges of reshaping institutional missions in the context of retrenchment. Such a statement actually assumes a cause and effect relationship between the terms "missions" and "retrenchment" or, if not that, at least some other kind of reciprocal relationship. If the former is the case, it becomes necessary to ask which is the cause and which the effect in order to address ourselves to the resultant problems; if the latter is the case, the question arises whether a potentially destructive interaction can be averted through imaginative intervention. From the vantage point of this president whose institutional mission has been distinctly threatened by budgetary exigencies over several years, it is necessary to explore the concepts of "mission" and "retrenchment" quite separately before attempting to deal with the possible complex relationships between the two. I use the word "possible" advisedly because I am not yet certain of either the nature or the extent of the interaction. Instead I would like to let both concepts emerge as clearly as possible as I develop them here and then look at the interactive patterns in light of the desperately needed interventions.
At this moment I am not even certain that creative and acceptable interventions can be found just as I am unsure whether the "reshaping of a mission in the context of retrenchment" can ever be appropriate or useful.

The Complexity of an Institutional Mission

- What is it?
- Is it a lofty ideal that espouses global concepts of educational commitment?
- Is it a broad statement of educational principle for a given institution?
- Is it a statement of educational direction seen within a context of reality?
- Should it be fixed, conceived in thought and language capable of transcending economic and demographic changes, or
- Should it be sufficiently flexible to be readily refocused in times of serious external pressures?
- Should the mission statement be of an entirely qualitative nature or should it contain quantitative measurable aspects?

I can not provide a simple yes or no answer to any of these questions. Perhaps there isn't one prescription that would fulfill an institution's needs under all possible conditions but it seems clear to me that the viability and survival of a mission are anchored in the rationale for its initial formulation. It is perhaps this fact that is most often overlooked. It is absolutely essential that the charter of an institution be preceded by a concise needs assessment that includes the demographic, economic, socio-cultural and educational realities of a given region. The results of such a study should provide the basis for a mission rationale in any consideration of educational direction and focus. In my view, therefore, the mission is the center - not the circumference.

Let me work with a concrete example for a moment by quoting the mission of the college I know best, i. e., New York City Community College:

MISSION STATEMENT

> The mission of New York City Community College is to meet the needs of its varied urban constituencies through rich and diversified curricula which emphasize career education. To this end, the College strives to provide students with an applied and theoretical base in the arts, sciences, and technologies upon which they may build or change careers, pursue further educational goals, and contribute as citizens and workers to the social and economic life of the City and State. Such a task requires flexibility on the part of the institution in anticipating and responding to demographic changes as well as to developments in business, industry, and the professions. The College is dedicated to quality education in an urban environment, to excellence in teaching, and to full access to higher education for those who seek fulfillment of personal, career or socio-economic goals.

This mission statement was written just a year ago in preparation for a Middle States reaccreditation. It is interesting to note here that the entire college community was involved in studying the college's existing mission statement, judging its appropriateness and reformulating it if that were deemed necessary or desirable at that particular point in time. There is of course no question that the college currently exists in a period of extreme financial constraints, yet the mission statement I just quoted differs from an earlier one in only two ways:

(1) Minor language changes;

(2) The emphasis on an arts and science foundation as essential for growth was introduced. Not that it had not always been part of each curriculum, but it is now viewed as so integral a need for all career preparation and growth that its inclusion in the mission statement was considered essential.

Looking at our mission in its totality, I would now like to relate it to the six questions I asked a moment ago:

Is it a lofty ideal that espouses global concepts of educational commitment?

Perhaps there are certain elements or phrases that might be described thus - "dedicated to quality education - excellence in teaching - access to higher education for those who seek fulfillment. But basically, there is certainly little that is "lofty" in the statement.

Is it a broad statement of educational principle for a given institution?

Yes, I believe so. It emphasizes that all career and technical education offered at this college will retain its collegiate relevance through the "theoretical and applied arts and science base upon which career or further education may be built. Not including such a principle at a time of rapidly increasing sophistication and specialization in the technologies might actually shift the mission into very narrow vocational training sequences instead of advancing broader technical education concepts.

Is it a statement of educational direction seen within a context of reality?

Definitely! The direction is expressed through the term "career education" - it addresses reality by retaining its flexibility in response to the needs of industry and the professions as well as in its response to demographic and socio-cultural changes in the urban population.

Should it be fixed, conceived in thought and language capable of transcending economic and demographic changes?

Yes, to a certain degree - as an example NYCCC's mission has always addressed "a varied urban constituency." The fact that this student constituency has a totally different complexion today does not alter the fact that the students were always the children of the latest immigrant group, of the poor, of those who did not enjoy education privileges before them - similarly, the needs of industry and the professions have changed drastically during the last two decades, so the college must be flexible in its program development. The curricular offerings might be totally different - the teaching approaches different, yet, meeting the needs of industry and the professions, as emphasized in the mission, remains the prime focus - unaltered.

Should it be sufficiently flexible to be readily refocused in times of serious external pressures?

At the risk of taking a very unpopular stance, it is my view that no mission should be developed with that question in mind. Let me give an example: If NYCCC was originally chartered to provide career education to a varied urban constituency and to meet the needs of industry and the professions, then it obviously was specifically designed and equipped to fulfill that need. Some might argue that in times of great financial need, NYCCC might shift its focus, relinquish its high-cost programs and become a community college with a vast preponderance of liberal arts programs and few soft career programs. Such a move might be appealing and humane to those employed at the college - their jobs would be saved. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that -

(1) the student constituency would no longer be served as designed;

(2) industry and the professions would no longer be served;

(3) the institution becomes a self-serving and self-perpetuating bureaucracy;

The mission has been destroyed.

Should the mission statement be of an entirely qualitative nature or should it contain quantitative measurable aspects?

It is my view that this would be highly desirable. To the extent that the mission emphasizes the qualitative it may retain some measure of flexibility - quite usefully and justifiably so - the quantitative statements are better reserved for statements of long-term goals and short-term objectives which, together, fit into an overall mission.

Having explored the notion of a mission in some detail, I'd like to look at the second component of my topic - retrenchment.

Retrenchment

The term is generally defined as curtailment or excision; its synonyms are given as lessening or diminution. The negative connotations of these terms are really staggering. No wonder that the mere use of the word "retrenchment" produces shudders in the academic community.

In higher education, retrenchment is a drastic and dramatic response to either (1) diminishing student populations, (2) declining financial resources, or (3) a combination of both. The systems where FTE related budget formulae determine the fiscal structure of an institution, the latter is very frequently the case.

Diminishing Student Populations

Student numbers decline in response to a variety of causes. Declining birth-rates, shifts in perception of the importance of higher education, questions of employability at the end of a program of study, perceived needs of education for education's sake, availability of financial resources as well as a multitude of socio-cultural factors all attribute to shifts in student interest in higher education. In specialized colleges, the rapidly changing needs of a sophisticated technically oriented society must be translated into equally rapid responses in program shift and complexity. In recent decades, these shifts have had to occur so rapidly that an important factor was ignored - that of educating the public, both parents and potential student so that career choices are clearly understood and serve to arouse student interest and motivation - too often, lack of understanding has served to destroy a career because a student entered with unrealistic expectations.

Accepting the fact that for all reasons already cited and probably several others which I didn't mention, the entering student cohort will be reduced, the higher education community faces its greatest challenge in retaining that same student cohort until a credential has been achieved or, at least, until an individual objective has been met. While colleges spend large amounts of time and energy to attract students to their campuses, to lure them, many times, with less than sound academic practices that promise an educational panacea without the requirement of rigorous study, they do little in the area of sound retention practices. National figures indicate that no more than 50% of entering students complete their baccalaureate degrees, and 2 year colleges can boast with no more than 30-40% of their entering freshmen as Associate Degree recipients. When we speak of

diminishing student numbers, the pursuit of new students in the face of fierce competition seems relatively fruitless when compared to the magnificent potential that serious retention efforts promise in relation to the continuity of college mission.

Declining Financial Resources

In a period of such serious fiscal exigencies as the higher education community now faces, it is urgent to recognize that, while we are relatively impotent in influencing the public funds that flow into an institution, our internal long and short-range planning efforts are capable of assisting us in allocating those meager funds as productively within a given institution as possible. That statement relates directly to the notion that "mission" is central to any institution and must, in my view, be preserved if at all feasible. Once again, I must assume that the funding patterns of an institution have routinely been geared to the fulfillment of its mission in the broadest possible sense. Internal allocation pattern must therefore also reflect the understanding that maintenance of mission is urgent to the survival of institutional integrity. Let me give an example:

> NYCCC provides twenty-eight highly technical, sophisticated career programs which are totally dependent on equally sophisticated, up-to-date equipment that must be maintained by adequately trained college laboratory technicians. If, in its budget allocations, it attempts to deal with successive cuts by, year after year, removing in an even-handed way, across the board, some equipment money from each program and some technical service from each program, it will, in effect, after a few years time have rendered most of these twenty-eight programs non-functional. A given program will no longer be able to train students on current generations of equipment - graduates will really not have

marketable skills - industry and the professions will not be served. The institution has been handled "humanely" - the mission has been destroyed - and I must ask myself, what function does such an institution serve? If, however, the planned phase-out of one or two entire high-cost programs can preserve the integrity and financial viability of all other programs, then we have dealt less "humanely" with the individuals involved, we have curtailed or excised, but we have lessened or diminished in nothing but size. The mission remains intact. One word of caution, however, is in order here. The possibility that the one high cost program that was phased out was also one which supplied an important labor force to the profession and industry is not at all remote. Therefore, such phase-outs should be considered only within the context of sound regional educational planning - undertaken jointly by public and independent educational institutions.

The Interaction of Mission and Retrenchment

Having looked at each of these concepts separately, it is now time to speak more definitively of their interaction. There is little question in my mind that in times of great financial difficulties and declining student populations, administrators, faculty and staff alike would list as their first priority "the survival of the institution." Arguing against such sentiments would be like speaking against motherhood and apple pie. And yet, I must point out again that we are speaking of saving jobs, not of the purpose for which a college was created. As I mentioned earlier, the danger of becoming a self-perpetuating bureaucracy is great if, indeed, the existence of the college is preserved through a mission change dictated by funding

limitations alone. It is my view that college missions must be formulated, reviewed and reformulated on an ongoing basis - in response to the socio-cultural, economic and educational reality in which they exist. At no time should external economic pressures alone determine the reformulation of a mission. To a large extent, a total absence of or, at least, inadequate long-range planning has been responsible for the unresponsiveness of institutions to any kind of change in a timely fashion. When, however, the funding problems are such that retrenchment cannot be avoided, it must proceed independently of mission considerations. I reject a cause and effect relationship between the two and postulate further that, retrenchment, however painful and destructive, can proceed without destroying the institutional mission. Instead, preservation of a functional mission, in the face of retrenchment, needs to be pursued vigorously. The mission need not change, but the approaches to its accomplishment must. To the extent that such approaches are successful, they will also affect the degree of retrenchment required over a given period of time.

Ranging from such matters as the delivery mode of instructional services, student-faculty ratios, conventional equipment purchases and plant maintenance to such matters at early retirement incentives for faculty, exploration of functional tenure patterns, retraining of faculty, using sabbatical leaves for retraining purposes, faculty exchanges among colleges within a system - any and all will have to be explored in the decade right before us if we are to maintain a viable delivery system of educational services to our student constituency. To assume that each college can undertake such a task independently is pure folly -

the moment has come when higher education systems must recognize their interdependence - that a team effort is absolutely essential - an effort that can be achieved only if we ask the question correctly - not, how can we survive, but how best can we provide a student population with the educational services which will assist and motivate them to become functionally integrated in a constantly changing society.

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